Improving Students' Writing

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Many of us have engaged ourselves in the teaching of composition, hoping to turn our students into better writers. Everything from appositives to punctuation, topic sentences to conclusions, various drills, model letters, audio-visual techniques, and many more activities have filled our syllabus' in attempts to help our students achieve the end product of error-free written discourse. But, does error-free writing constitute "good writing?" What exactly is "good writing" or "bad writing?" For that matter, what is a writer? What do we consider as writing or composition? For our purposes, writing shall be defined as *the ability to develop one's thoughts, organize them clearly, and express them* (in written form) *to a specific audience convincingly to an absent reader.* (From "Writing in the Foreign Language," p. 147.) Furthermore, the words "writing" and "composition" will be used interchangeably to denote activities in relation with written language, including sentences, paragraphs, and essays. This paper intends to examine the answers to the questions above as it provides an overview of the recent changes occurring in the methodology of writing instruction, relating these current changes in perspective to the positive ways in which developing writers are being affected.

What comprises language learning? Four main categories have been determined as basic language skills —— speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is uncommon to find "writing" in first or second place when these four categories are listed. Why isn't "writing" a priority? One possible reason is that, for most learners, writing (as defined above) is considered as a less-useful skill in comparison to the others. The ability to converse and comprehend oral language is of utmost importance to language learners. But, what student really expects to write to any great extent? Another reason writing is not usually considered a priority in language learning is that teachers know of the difficulty students experience in learning transcription skills and may consider composition skills as unrealistic goals for second language learners.

We have briefly looked at some possible reasons why writing may not be considered a primary goal for language learners. However, as much as we may identify with the above reasons, the other side of the matter must be considered; that is, there is a possibility that learning to write is a necessary goal in achieving language fluency in order to have the ability to express one's self wholly in a language. Why is it that many modern methodologists limit their discussions of writing to transcription —— that is, "Writing which primarily focuses on the form of language, such as grammatical or lexical structure." (From "Writing in the Foreign Language", p. 145.) Why is the studying of composition (as defined above) left only for the student who has attained a very high level of foreign language proficiency? Why is so little said about how students *develop* composition skills? It seems to be generally assumed that, after the patterns of language are easily applied to oral language, the ability to use those forms in written language will naturally follow. If this is true, then why is it also difficult for native language

speakers to master the skill of writing in their own languages? And, if the ability to write in a language naturally follows knowledge and application of the language's patterns, then why do students consistently go beyond their learned patterns needing constantly to be held in check by their teachers? Perhaps our writing instruction needs a change in focus. Grammar, dissection of sentences, drills, and so on, don't teach us how to write. These aspects only represent certain components; wholeness is the key. We must hereby shift our thinking from writing to achieve a product to the fact that writing is a process.

Let's consider the writer. He arrives in our classes having experienced a continued emphasis on surface correctness (punctuation, spelling, ...) since early in his education. He has received countless hours of grammatical instruction. He has seen his essays "bloodied up" (K.K. Osterholm, 1986, p. 135.) by the red pens of English teachers, perhaps having received some negative, sometimes devastating comments in the margins at one time or another. His teacher has been the audience that he has primarily written for all his life. It's no wonder he approaches the subject of composition warily. Shaughnessy (1977, p. 7) poignantly keynotes some of the writer's perplexities when she states:

"... academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone ... writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws."

Certainly, teachers are in a dilemma, too. We are, in a sense, responsible both for helping students achieve better written end-products and for evaluating those products. Undoubtedly, our intent is to help students to become better writers. Yet, if not by emphasizing error-correction, how do we do it? Thanks to research in the area of methodology in recent years, there are alternatives. We will briefly look at what differentiates "good writing" from "bad writing" before we consider the specific alternatives to traditional methodology in teaching writing. Since writing should be viewed as a process, it is necessary to utilize the process of wholeness in comparing "good writing" to "bad writing." Therefore, our focus will be on the characteristics of skilled/unskilled writers as well as on the characteristics of their "good" or "bad" writing.

K.K. Osterholm in "Writing in the Native Language" suggests that unskilled writers experience four main obstacles to achieving "good writing." These are as follows: an egocentric view, writer's block, writing apprehension, and revision problems. 1) The unskilled writer's egocentric view pertains to all writers, infact, as they begin to learn the process of writing. Their texts read as "interior monologues" (Flower, 1981, p. 276) including focus shifts that make the reader sort through the thinking as he reads (writer-based prose.) Skilled writers go beyond this stage to transform it into reader- based prose. T. Dvorak, p. 151, defines it as "prose which develops its message around a goal shared with the reader, anticipating reader response." It is refined, elaborated upon, and provides contextual organization which assists the reader in understanding the main and supporting ideas. 2) Poor writers also suffer from writer's block. They follow self-imposed rules, such as, having to write the title first. Or, for example, having to begin with a very attention-getting opening line. Writers suffering from this "block" end up stifling themselves before they even begin to write. 3) Writing apprehension is as serious as writer's block. These students avoid situations which they believe require them to write. They even go to the extent as to choose academic majors or occupations which they percieve as including less of a need to write. Forcing these students to write is, in their estimation, a form of punishment. 4) Revision

should be an activity that occurs throughout the writing process. But, for unskilled writers, it may be overwhelming. Poor writers tend to deal with surface matters. They experience difficulty being self-critical, having to view their writing from a non-egocentric perspective. They search for errors, wrong words and lose sight of the essay as a whole. Skilled writers add, drop, substitute, and so on according to a sense of what the essay needs. In essense, their revision includes, "flexibility, suspended judgement, the weighing of possibilities, and the reworking of ideas" (Perl, 1979, p. 333). Good writers end up with reader-based prose while poor writers achieve writer-based prose. Thus, "good writing" must be defined as reader-based prose. "Bad writing," on the other hand must indicate writer-based prose.

In order to assist students in writing good, reader-based prose, we must first consider, as stated earlier, that their writing is no longer focused on a product. They are *writing as a process*. The focus is on the drafts of written discourse rather than on the final, finished essay. Thus, we must concern ourselves with the methodology that will facilitate this process. According to Krashen, competence in a language develops as a result of acquistion and learning. *Acquisition* is the "unconscious process that occurs during comprehension of input provided within a meaningful context in an affectively positive environment" (T. Dvorak, p. 153). This includes both comprehension and production of language. For example, a student knows that sentences begin with capital letters and, therefore, capitalizes in the appropriate places as he writes. *Learning* is a "conscious process that usually results from formal grammatical study or practice" (T. Dvorak, p. 153). For example, a student studies subordinate clauses and can identify them in sentences. The relationship between aquisition and learning illustrates the belief that language development comes out of a need and a desire to discover and share meaning. Writing instruction must be viewed as the process of helping students learn a more effective way of developing and expressing ideas.

The methodology of how to teach students to write has change throughout history. K.K. Osterholm explains the progression as follows: The Greeks viewed writing as a rhetorical skill, developed by imitating the writing or masters and which resulted in the creation of one's own style. The ability to develop arguments logically was of primary importance. The Middle Ages, however, limited writing to translation. The 19th Century saw emphasis on structural accuracy which led to the Audiolingual revolution of this century. Until recently, writing has been thought of as "sound transferred to a different modality, talk on paper" (Prochoroff, 1963). This way of thinking included four aspects of learning to write. First, exposure to written language occurred after students had developed a strong oral base. Secondly, students were to use only vocabulary and patterns previously taught from oral drilling. Thirdly, quality of writing was determined by the presence or absence of error. And, lastly, errors were expected and avoided. Students made careful corrections and repeatedly practiced writing because it was impossible to avoid making errors.

In considering current methodology, an appropriate place to begin is with feedback. Teacher feedback is crucial. With the second language student, is the success of his written discourse determined by the teacher's ability to understand the text? If so, can the teacher be assured that it is also what the student meant? Obviously, students and their teachers need to be in communication in order to create good, reader-based prose. This kind of communication can be accomplished through workshop settings using the conference method, peer group method, or a combination of methods. In workshop settings, the teacher is primarily a consultant rather than a dominating presence. The classroom maintains an air of trust which should reduce apprehension and build self-esteem among the students. At first, stu-

dents accustomed to the traditional lecture-method classroom may feel uncomfortable with the teacher's *seeming* lack of error-correction. Students should be made aware of the advantages of this approach to writing. Those students who unduly concern themselves with error should find their fears diminishing when they begin to put the concern where it belongs-- at the end of the writing process.

A workshop setting is especially conducive to the Conference Method. Basically, during a 50 minute class, the teacher holds as many three to five minute conferences as are possible. Students and their teachers discuss the student' writing, considering one problem per conference. "Problems" include: content (ideas, information), point of view (purpose, audience), style (diction, syntax), and mechanics (grammar, punctuation.) Since any particular paper is in conference several times throughout the course, the teacher is familiar with it and can respond quickly. Grades are given at the end of each semester when each student turns in a certain number of papers, each of which has undergone a series of drafts.

The positive aspects to the Conference Method are numerous. First, individual instruction is more effective than group instruction. Secondly, teachers can respond more effectively to the paper in an oral conference than by written comments. Thirdly, students learn more from oral responses. Fourthly, conferences promote self-learning. And, lastly, the conferences may be the most effective use of a teacher's time. However, two drawbacks must be considered in regards to this method. If conference teachers are not trained in conferencing, they could end up asking and then answering their own questions. Also, if the teacher alone is responding to the writing, then the students may be unprepared for an audience outside the school setting.

Another method that fulfills the need for a varied audience is the Peer Group Method. This method primarily focuses on small group work. Students meet in groups of two to small groups, progressively, to critique each other's compositions. Structure is critical. Teacher modelling is essential to the training of the students in using this method since many of them do not have either the confidence or the ability to evaluate writing in any beneficial way for their peers. Thus, they would need to practice the response techniques and train before actualizing this approach. McAndrew and Reingstad, 1984, created a guide for students to use in their assessments of other's papers. It is as follows:

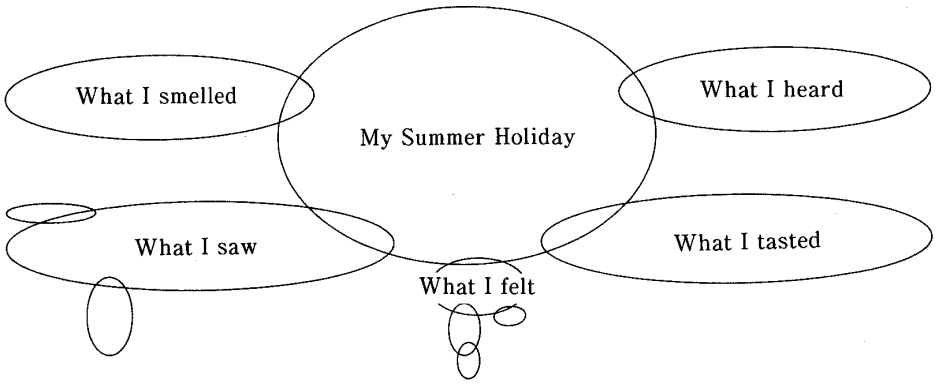
1. Begin with a positive comment to create rapport with writer.
2. State two positive comments about the papers (strengths.)
3. Describe any weakness listed in these areas: a) focus b) voice c) organization d) development. Then, suggest a strategy to eliminate the weakness.
4. List any weakness in structure, punctuation, usage, or spelling. Suggest a strategy to eliminate the weakness.

In spite of the tremendous need for classroom structure, student training, and teacher modelling, one of the more beneficial aspects of this method is that the writers' audience is the real-world type of readers. Therefore, the writing of prose for the teacher-as-audience is removed.

Having considered several methological possibilities, there is a need to consider some strategies within the classroom context to help students to avoid what is referred to as, "task overload" (Scardemalia, 1981). That is, helping the student not to become overwhelmed by what he is asked to do -- juggling concerns for correct language usage with developing a focused plan for the composition. Begin-

ners especially need help to prepare to write more effectively as well as to learn to view writing as a progression through drafts. Thus, prewriting exercises assist students in understanding that a piece of writing is hardly ever perfect the first time. There are various styles and methods for prewriting, a few of which are listed as follows:

1. Journal/ Diary. Students keep a journal in which they write whatever they wish each day.
2. Free writing or Brainstorming. Students write continually about any subject they wish for a set amount of time, usually about 10 minutes. They do not concern themselves at all with writing mechanics, structure, context, voice, or any other specific component.
3.



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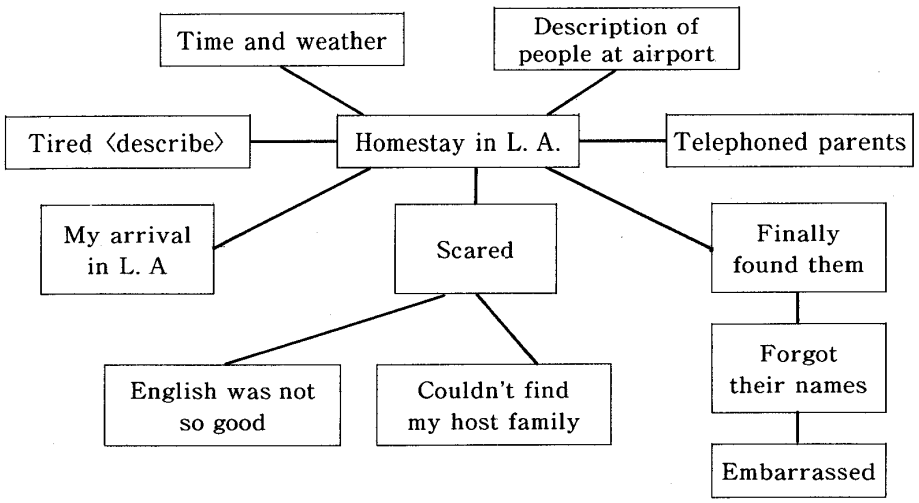

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5. Prewriting with the computer. Using simple word-processing programs on computers can assist prewriting as it eases the beginner's tensions in a number of ways. The writer can simply erase by using the backspace key. Paper inhibits the flow of words that the computer can facilitate. It also overcomes poor handwriting, spelling. Since the copy looks professional, it tends to boost the student's self-confidence. Writers become more relaxed about putting words down on paper because their spelling is so easily corrected Finally, revision can occur without the tedious re-

copying writing on paper requires.

After prewriting, students need to learn to develop focus in their writing. They need to be given assignments which will assist them in constructing larger, coherent pieces of writing. Traditionally, the assignments were product-oriented, such as the typical character change exercise. For example, in this exercise, students might read a story about a waitress. Then, the waitress is exchanged for a princess and the students must make all the appropriate, logical changes. In contrast, the following exercise exemplifies the idea of writing-as-a-process: Students receive a list of questions. Then, they are given a a purpose. They must decide which questions need answers and then put them in order. This activity provides practice in determining focus, purpose, and ordering; whereas, the traditional exercise was basically transcription.

After students are able to prewrite, determine focus, and can somewhat construct larger, coherent pieces of writing, they come to the second phase of writing. Here, the students need to write for a greater variety of purposes, such as, to describe, inform, and persuade. They need to learn how the purpose of an essay affects its content and structure. For example, if the purpose of a piece of writing is to describe a personal event, then the content will contain personal detail, opinion, and so on, while the structure may be quite loose. This approach would be contrasted sharply if, perhaps, the purpose was to create a text of logical persuasion. During this second phase of writing, students will benefit from the exposure to and practice of many types of rhetorical patterns, such as, narration, comparison, contrast, and definition. At this stage, students also need to develop strategies for editing texts. Implementing the Peer Group Method, or a variation of such, may be especially beneficial to students. As teachers, helping students to improve their grammatical accuracy and choices of words can become a dominant concern. But, although it is important, it should not be the primary concern. Studies have shown that grammatical accuracy and choice develops itself progressively through students' writing. Also, research has indicated that analyzing someone else's writing is beneficial in this manner.("Writing in the Native Language", p. 148)

The final phase in process writing focuses on the quality of the student's written language. The object for students at this point in the process is to instill in written language the qualities of oral language that identify good communication. These qualities (existing in both oral and written language) include voice, tone, naturalness, clarity of purpose, and the direction of one's communication to a specific audience. In writing, this should achieve reader-based prose.

In a general sense, there are many specific activities in which students can engage themseives for the purpose of improving their writing. These may be undertaken at any phase in their aquisition of writing skills. Reading exposes students to many kinds of prose which develops their sensitivities as to how authors' goals are revealed through their varied use of language and text structures. In addition, reading is one of the best methods for improving vocabulary. Another activity that can be useful is for students to analyze and imitate the rhetorical patterns of various writers. This suggestion may appear to be one of writing for an end-product emphasis. It is true that form is emphasized. However, if the purpose in the classroom is not solely imitation, then this type of practice may be beneficial. Through it, students should develop an awareness of the way in which a text's structural organization relates to its goals. Lastly, sentence-combining exercises have proven to be greatly beneficial to students. From this, students learn to create various structures, thus, helping their writing to mature.

Earlier in this discussion of writing, we briefly considered the role of the teacher as consultant in

the classroom in light of the need for students to receive appropriate feedback. Teachers may find the label, "consultant" useful in conferencing, but how does one respond to the need for student evaluation? Does one remain a consultant? We are all aware that there comes a time and place where some form of correction/evaluation must occur. This is often a difficult task, at best. How do we evaluate students' writing skills? Obviously, there are no easy answers. In order to meet the need for concrete evaluation, we may be tempted to correct the surface errors in our students' writing. Mechanical errors and such are certainly the easiest to detect and measure. However, perhaps our students will benefit more from less correction and more positive response. Disregarding the impact of the red pen on students, excessive comments, also, may actually undo much of what we are trying to accomplish. Research has shown that most teacher's comments are not text-specific (pertaining particularly to the student's text which they are reading) and could be rubber-stamped from text to text. In other words, the students don't understand how the comments apply to their own writing. (K.K. Osterholm) Sometimes the comments suggest that the writers attend to so much correction that they give up. Also, there is a danger than heavy correction suggests to the student that the teacher had a certain idea which was more important than his own. In other words, the student is left feeling that what he said (in his writing) was less relevant than his teacher's impression of what he should have said. Obviously, all of the above seems rather defeatist in regards to what we are hoping to accomplish as composition teachers.

However, positive guidelines do exist that we can incorporate into our classroom evaluation. The following model, provided by Beaven (1977. pp. 140-1) suggests six steps for teacher response:

1. Decide how you are going to respond: written comments, tape-recorded comments, personal conference.
2. Read the paper and, where the motivation is genuine and spontaneous, use commentary for developing a trusting environment.
3. Offer one positive comment, either general or specific.
4. Establish a goal for the student to work toward, stating it in a positive way.
5. Evaluate the student's next paper according to the goal(s) previously described. Do not prescribe additional goals until the student is able to handle ones already given.
6. Every three to four weeks, depending on how much writing is done, have students revise a paper for a more through evaluation.

A final word on the subject of evaluation must be focused on the problem of grades. For this, there is no easy remedy. However, the writing-as-a-process approach does provide some relief because of the fact that students do receive feedback throughout their writing experiences, hopefully, creating better final products and, thus, receiving higher grades. Of course, there are many ways in which to assess skills but three specific methods have been considered useful by teachers. The first one allows students to decide which compositions are ready to be graded. In this method, students make selections after peer and teacher response and after personal revision has occurred. For the second possibility, teachers use a system of interim grades which may be changed with each new piece of revised writing submitted for evaluation. Thirdly, some teachers give no grades during the term but require a portfolio of writing at the end of the course. Undoubtedly, there are other variations which many prove just as useful for teacher evaluation.

To this point, we have considered many facets of teaching composition, from determining the skills of a good writer, to critiquing teacher-student response. We have become acquainted with new methodology and we have analyzed the major obstacles unskilled writers face, among other points. However, throughout this discussion, hopefully, we have not only come away with a fresh idea or two as to making our writing classes more effective; but, perhaps we have a greater sense that writing is not just a product. We are obviously training our students to achieve a more mature, effective product in written discourse. But, that is not all. As students learn that writing is a process during which their texts are refined, their awareness' of their increasing abilities to express themselves, not only coherently but eloquently in language, cannot help but affect them wholly. They benefit in ways even unrelated to the writing skills they gaining. They come away with self-confidence, which in turn creates better self-image, which in turn creates wholeness. From where does this increase in self-esteem arise? From the power of words. From the ability to express and share meaning. To be human is to communicate. We must conclude that mastery over written discourse, having the ability to write well at one's disposal to use for any purpose, must be entirely satisfying for our students.

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